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Nella Larsen's *Passing*: Ambivalence of the Narrative\*

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ハーレム・ルネサンス期を代表する作家の1人であるネラ・ラーセンが1929年に発表した小説『パッシング』は、黒人が肌の白さによってカラーラインを越えることで起こる「パッシング」問題を織り交ぜながら、中産階級の黒人女性を描いた作品である。本稿では、『パッシング』の二人の主人公、アイリーンとクレアのうち、アイリーンの視点に着目し、アンビヴァレントな語りと結末の曖昧性が作品への多様な解釈をうみ、物語の重層性を成していることを述べる。

アイリーンの視点による三人称の語りは、自意識的であると同時に無意識的でもある。ラーセンが、作品の真髄において白人中心社会に抵抗しようとし、ムラト（混血）女性としてのアイデンティティを訴え、中産階級を揶揄しているということを主人公アイリーンの視点から提示したい。ラーセンの戦略を、特に以下の三点、アイリーンのパッシングに露呈される無意識の部分、その結果として演じることになる「レディ」、そして作品の結末部分であるクレアの死から論考する。無意識のうちに「白いマスク」を被りパッシングを行い、レディを装うアイリーンの姿は、時として矛盾をはらみ滑稽さを伴う。彼女のマスクには、複雑な二重の意識が暗示され、結果としてアイリーンはクレアが存在によりアイデンティティの悩みを抱えることになる。論争となる結末のクレアの死については、クレア自殺説と他殺説両方の解釈の可能性を示唆し、筆者ラーセンが意図的に仕掛けたものであるとする。

『パッシング』に込められた風刺は当時の社会状況を体現している。ラーセンが世に送り出した新たなパッシング小説により、他のアフリカ系アメリカ人作家へコンヴェンションを超える鼓動を与えたといっていいただろう。

## 1 Introduction

Nella Larsen's *Passing* (1929) is one of the prominent "passing" genre novels in the Harlem Renaissance. The novel has been reviewed as a kind of autobiographical work in the

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same vein as her first novel *Quicksand* (1928). It might be possible to interpret that both novels set the displacement of middle class black women in the society and their strong desires to be free. In fact, Larsen herself was annoyed by her own identity because she was a mulatto. Her rejection by her white mother and the Scandinavian community in which she was raised, in addition to the alienation she felt from blacks in the South, left her with a sober view of the world. Her sensitive sense of nonbelonging to both black and white societies intensified her ambivalence about race.

The main story begins when Irene Redfield encounters her childhood friend Clare Kendry in a hotel restaurant in Chicago when the both beautiful, light-skinned mulattoes are crossing the color line, so-called 'passing'. Although Irene 'passes' only for her own convenience when she goes out to restaurants and theaters, Clare completely 'passes' in the white world and has even married Jack Bellew, a wealthy white man who is unaware of her true racial identity. The old friends' reunion introduces the novel's focus on mulattos, and the effects of "passing" on individuals and their families. After Clare desires to join the black community again, Irene warns her that her desires are risky. Irene, too, gradually becomes troubled by the "problem" of passing because of Clare. The story comes to an end with Clare's death when Bellew confronts her to reveal her racial identity.

Most critical studies on *Passing* pay attention to Clare's passing as the central theme. Some critics, however, refer to the characterization of Irene, with the focus on her psychology and sexuality. Claudia Tate argues about Irene's psychological ambiguity. Jonathan Little criticizes Irene's irony, adding the argument of Deborah McDowell implying Irene's sexual desire toward Clare. Although Larsen's *Passing* seems to be centered on Clare Kendry's passing, I would argue that it is actually more about Irene's passing; indeed, the novel explores her complicated racial mask and identity. Irene's viewpoint as the ambivalent third-person narrator seems both conscious and unconscious. Irene's passing with her white mask and mocking the black middle classes reinforce the white supremacy in the society. At the same time, her narrative questions the world that divides people into "black" and "white." Larsen satirizes the social norms and values of women in the bourgeoisie. She criticizes the dominant society, and at the same time, she warns black people that passing is still a performance regulated by the conventions of white supremacy. In short, Larsen's ambiguous narrative in *Passing* provides us diverse interpretations.

This paper is organized as follows: firstly, Irene's unconscious passing and her role as a white lady that reveals her white mask and mocks the white society will be discussed; and

then the interpretation of the ending scene, particularly about Clare's death, will be given. Finally, the paper will conclude Larsen's strategy upon *Passing*.

## 2 Irene's Unconscious Passing

In passing, black people wear the mask versions of their own racial faces to veil their black identities, and gain mobility, access, and acceptance in everyday white society. Irene's first-person viewpoint exposes her unconscious passing with this white mask. For instance, Act Two in Part One of the novel shows her unconsciously performing passing. Irene "passes" at the Drayton Hotel in Chicago. Taking the elevator up to the top floor symbolizes her upward social mobility to the white world even as it signals the cross over into her performance mood: "It was, she thought, like being wafted upward on a magic carpet to another world" (147). Certainly, passing enables Irene to cross from one racial world to another, but she is, nevertheless, still anxious about the eyes of others and notices when someone stares at her. Since Irene passes unconsciously, she represses the role of race in this scene and pays more attention to her etiquette. Only after some time does she become conscious of the fear of racial passing: "Did that woman, could that woman, somehow know that here before her very eyes on the roof of the Drayton sat a Negro?" (150). If she had been passing consciously, she would have been aware of her race from the first because passing always involves the risks of being exposed, and punished, for being black. Irene's thinking about her passing changes from social acceptance and etiquette to concerns about race.

When she is alone as in the Drayton scene, Irene has no difficulties in passing. Indeed, we learn almost casually that she has 'passed' successfully before. Irene psychologically has repressed her "act" of passing and instead sees her audience as responsible for mis-recognition:

Absurd! Impossible! White people were so stupid about such things for all that they usually asserted that they were able to tell...They always took her for an Italian, a Spaniard, a Mexican, or a gipsy. Never when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro. No, the woman sitting there staring at her couldn't possibly know." (150)

Black people also may not be able to tell who is passing and who is not, just as white people cannot. And in fact, Irene did not notice that the woman sitting near her at the Drayton was

her old friend, Clare Kendry, who was also passing. Importantly, Irene's narrative, which is presented in third person, reveals an Otherness within her. The possibility of replacement from a third-person to a first-person viewpoint implies the donning of Irene's racial mask. Jacquelyn McLendon argues that "this narrational mode creates a disguised 'I', as it were, emphasizing Irene's repression and the use of passing as structure" (99). For example, the text that reads "Never when she was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that she was a Negro" (150) might read "Never when I [Irene] was alone, had they even remotely seemed to suspect that I was a Negro." To identify herself as objective 'she', Irene distances herself from the strong subjective 'I', and assumes another identity when she is passing.

In this way, Irene has a "double-consciousness", in reference to the biracial identities that passing people often have. Here, her double-consciousness stands not for the exactly the same one W.E.B. Du Bois theorizes in *The Souls of Black Folk* but for the consciousness as black and white.<sup>1)</sup> Although Irene was obviously passing at the Drayton, she denies her passing when Clare asks her about it. Her contradictory attitude towards passing reveals her internal conflict over her motives for passing.

Irene continues her passing unconsciously. When she goes shopping with her black friend, Felise, she unexpectedly meets Clare's husband, Jack Bellew, in the street. Bellew calls her name and tries to shake her hands. As soon as Irene recognizes him, "her face had become a mask" (227). Irene pretends not to know him because she sees displeasure in his face. Teased about her passing by Felise, Irene makes an excuse for it to her:

"I do, but not for the reason you think. I don't believe I've ever gone native in my life except for the sake of convenience, restaurants, theatre tickets, and things like that. Never socially I mean, except once. You've just passed the only person that I've ever met disguised as a white woman" (227).

Whether the passing is personal or social, it is still nothing more than passing. When she denies her passing, she is essence simultaneously denying her white mask. Irene's excuse to Felise may sound ridiculous to her readers because it shows the truth that she wears her white mask and passes so often.

In comparison with her previous passing at the Drayton Hotel, her passing in this scene

<sup>1)</sup> Du Bois regards the "double-consciousness" as "One ever feels his two-ness, -an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder" (11).

implies another possible mask. At the Drayton, Irene wears a white mask and “passes” as usual for Clare and others. Here, Irene wears a black mask and performs “reverse-passing” for Bellew. If so, Irene denies not only her name but also her white mask that she put on in front of Bellew before. To behave as a black woman clinging to the black-skinned Felise, Irene completely denies her connection with Clare because Bellew’s “white” wife cannot have “black” friends. Thus, this scene indicates the complexity of Irene’s mask and identity. After all, this incident hints at Bellew that his wife is actually black. Irene’s passing exposes her ambiguity about her racial mask.

Larsen’s ironic criticism of racial ideology reflects Irene’s viewpoint. Irene belongs to black society and identifies herself as black. Her unconscious passing and relationships with others, however, reveal her whiteness ironically. Irene mimics the idea of a white lady of the white dominant society in black bourgeois society. Larsen satirizes Irene as ideal woman that society expects. As Irene passes unconsciously, she does not notice that her ideas show the typical white “lady” of genteel manners. For example, Irene attends the Negro Welfare League (NWL), and is proud of her important position in the committee. In fact, the NWL is modeled from the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and the Urban League. The activities of the NWL, including charity activities for poor black people, actually uplift her social status as a black bourgeois woman. In addition, it promotes her passing because respectable white people also join the society. The NWL prizes the whiteness of skin as representing class as well as racial status.

Unlike Irene, her black-skinned husband Brian does not like her involvement in the NWL because he regards such activities as hypocritical. When Brian hears from Irene about preparation for the NWL party, he replies: “Uplifting the brother’s no easy job. I’m as busy as a cat with fleas, myself” (186). Being a doctor, he is frustrated with his black middle class profession and its failure to accommodate the needs and social circumstance of poor black people. Therefore, the activity of the NWL reminds him of relationship to his patients. Brian also talks cynically about the dance parties in Harlem that many white people attend: “Pretty soon the coloured people won’t be allowed in at all, or will have to sit in Jim Crowed sections” (198). The contrast between Brian and Irene emphasizes her desire to be a member of the white dominant society even as Brian dreams of going to a colored society like in Brazil.

Irene’s relationships with her family and maids also show her mimicry of white society. Although Brian wants to raise his children up to be proud of being black, Irene treats her

children as if she defined them as "white". For instance, she wants to send her children to a boarding school in Europe just as Clare does her daughter. Furthermore, she avoids not only teaching her children about "unpleasant" topics, such as discrimination toward blacks or lynching, but also about using "dirty," sexual words because she thinks that such words are not appropriate for "ladies". Her attitude toward her black maids also signifies her self-image as a white lady. Irene feels uncomfortable when Clare talks to her black maids, Sadie and Zulena, in a friendly manner in the kitchen because she thinks that white ladies should not chat with maids as if they were of the same class. In following this custom, Irene is able to behave as a mistress and distinguish herself from the lower black classes.

Irene's role of a white lady is obvious in comparison with that of Clare's. Being an ideal woman that society expects, Irene strives to maintain a strong relationship with her husband and children. She repeatedly tells herself how her family is important to her. Irene insists that: "We mothers are all responsible for the security and happiness of our children" (197). She thinks of her husband and children all the time, as we can find her lines such as "there are boys!" and "Brian!" everywhere in the novel. In short, Irene is strongly connected to her gender role. Clare, on the other hand, insists on gain her individual freedom rather than dependency on her family. When Clare tells Irene how she is happy without her husband and daughter once in a while, Clare denies her loneliness without her daughter and says, "Children aren't everything," and continues, "there is other things in the world" (210). Larsen embodies her own social self in Irene and her ideal self in Clare.

As a result of such mimicry, Irene achieves an illusory elevation of her social status and passes socially as "white", all without her own conscious intent. Irene's white mask satirizes a "lady" in black middle class.

### 3 Blurry Ending

Passing people are often forced to struggle between their concealed identities as blacks and their facades of white identity. Clare's external presence accelerates Irene's internal struggle. Clare represents the mirror image of Irene's past, present, and future in some ways. Through Clare's passing, Irene represses her passing and maintains her black identity in front of Clare. At the same time, Irene reveals ironically just how Clare, wanting to express her black identity despite passing as white, is more like a black woman than Irene, a black woman in whiteface. Clare behaves honestly in accordance with her race, aware of her manipulation of others and game-playing. Irene, however, is not honest with herself. Clare

forces all of Irene's problems, particularly race and gender, to the surface. In other words, Clare's passing mask operates as the inversion of Irene's passing mask, rendering Irene's mask legible.

In the climax of the story, "Finale", all of Irene's imitation of white society is proven to be fruitless. She marries a physician who can elevate her social standing, and endeavors to be a devoted wife and mother for her family. Although it seems that Irene succeeds on her own, she fails in the end. In the tea party scene, Irene has become paranoid that her husband and Clare are having a love affair. Despite the fact that Irene is tired of Clare, Brian welcomes Clare to the party. When Irene realizes the close relationship between Brian and Clare, that is, her paranoid epiphany, she drops her white cup, breaking it into pieces. The black coffee spills from the white shards of container, staining the carpet. The way Irene reacts to this conveys her exaggeration of her "act". The white cup and black coffee have been interpreted as some symbols. Nell Sullivan claims that white cup symbolizes Clare, and its broken pieces connote the foreshadowing of her death, in shattering fall and breakup of the white cup that released the blackness within (381). However, I would argue that the broken white cup symbolizes Irene's white mask as a "lady at tea" with the repressed black contents flowing out representing her failure to succeed at her "act." Thus, coffee signifies Irene's black face. Simultaneously, however, the broken white cup also connotes the breakdown in Irene's secure repression of her blackness.

How to interpret the ending scene in *Passing* is often controversial. Again, Larsen's ambiguous narrative arouses suspicions of Clare's death as suicide, accident, or murder.<sup>2)</sup> Irene's narrative only tells us the situation and conceals a part of her thought. The way she consciously narrates the story at the ending scene hints that Irene might have pushed Clare out of the window. Thus, Irene might have killed Clare to protect her secure life. There is a lot of tantalizing evidence in the novel that Irene might have pushed Clare out of the window. Coincidentally, it is Irene who opens a window before Clare approaches to the window. When Bellew reveals his wife's race, Clare shows her smile. Irene narrates "It was that smile that maddened Irene. She ran across the room, her terror tinged with ferocity, and laid a hand on Clare's bare arm. One thought possessed her. She couldn't have Clare Kendry cast aside by Bellew" (239). Here, Irene's action suggests that Irene might have pushed Clare out of the window. Then, Irene's blurry viewpoint does not tell the fact. Larsen provides us the following description: "What happened next, Irene Redfield never afterwards allowed herself

<sup>2)</sup> For the arguments that support Irene's murder, see Davis 320-1; Little 179; McDowell xxix; McLendon 108-9; Wall 109. For both possibilities, see Sullivan 381-3; Tate 145-6.



to remember. Never clearly. One moment Clare had been there, a vital glowing thing, like a flame of red and gold. The next she was gone" (239).

In addition, it seems that Irene fainted to evade others' suspicion of her in causing Clare's death. The way she carefully observes others during the incident is odd. While people rush to the scene, she stays in the room solely and be in cool: "Should she put on her coat? Felise had rushed down without any wrap. So had all the others. So had Brian! He mustn't take cold. She took up his coat and left her own" (240). The act of fainting makes all things dark and cuts off her relation to the world. By fainting, Irene deflects suspicion away from herself, but her cool attitude also reveals her sympathy with the inevitable fate of the tragic death of a beautiful mulatto, "tragic mulatto" even as she does not share it, just as white readers' interest and sympathy for novels with the light-skinned mulattos. Illustrating the conventional tragedy of the mulatto in novels might hint at the historical and social circumstances of passing, but they just often veil the real problem behind these romantic narratives. Thus, the whiteness determines everything in American society.

Irene's ambiguous viewpoint also suggests that Clare jumped out of the window. It is certain that Clare kills herself until Bellew says "So you're a nigger, a damned dirty nigger!" (239). Thus, it is white society that forces Clare to jump out of the window, in other words, her white husband might have killed her. White people felt sympathy for mulatto heroines, but of course did not acknowledge that the tragedy was not simply internal to the character but rather caused by whites. They think that the tragedy simply comes from heroine's racial background as black. White people are often not conscious of their racial supremacy, taking it for granted. For example, Jessie Fauset's *Plum Bun* (1929) tells a passing story wherein a white teacher naively asks the passing mulatto protagonist why she did not tell him her true race. But even more important thing is the fact that Larsen has Irene see Clare's death as inevitable reality. Since Irene had hoped so passionately for Clare's death, she tries to deny her relation to the cause of Clare's death. If Irene pushes Clare out of the window, it means that she kills herself too, because as I previously mentioned, they mirror each other. Even though Clare's racist husband is the direct cause of her death, Irene is a complicit to expose Clare's race as Irene hints at it to Bellew. Irene could not separate her race from her identity after all. Larsen's creation of Irene as a character reveals the more dangerous consequences of unconscious belief in white supremacy.

Franz Fanon analyses the unconscious desire of blacks to be white: "it is because he lives in a society that makes his inferiority complex possible, in a society that derives its

stability from the perpetuation of this complex, in a society that proclaims the superiority of one race" (100). In this sense, Irene's unconscious passing and mimicking a white lady reveals that she lives in white centered society. Larsen tried to free mulatto characters from their problems about race and gender before Fanon attempted to free blacks from the unconscious desire and racial complex. Larsen, however, uses the death by going out an open window, as a solution of the story.

We need to peek at Irene's face under the white mask. Although she wears a white mask and passes as a white person, she cannot rid race from her identity. When Irene's conflict with Clare reaches its peak, "For the first time she suffered and rebelled because she was unable to disregard the burden of race" (225). Thus, she has both black and white faces, that is, two identities under her mask. She becomes aware of not only her superficial white identity but also her internal black identity by her passing and Clare. Irene realizes:

"She was caught between two allegiances, different, yet the same. Herself. Her race. Race! The thing that bound and suffocated her. Whatever steps she took, or if she took none at all, something would be crushed. A person or the race. Clare, herself, or the race. Or, it might be, all three" (225)

Therefore, Irene and Clare are inverse mirrors of each other. Irene can wear her white mask precisely because she belongs to black society. Her place in black society will cushion her fall if she feels insecure when she passes. Irene can live without a white mask, but she needs it to save "face". On the other hand, as we know, Clare cannot live in a white society as a "black" woman without her white mask. The white background of Clare's passing does not break her fall from white graces. Masks complicatedly conceal and reveal biracial identities in the passing world.

#### 4 Conclusion

In *Passing*, Larsen challenged the caricatures of white-centered society with her sharp observation and criticism of passing. Irene realizes her internal conflict over passing, performing a "lady" in whiteface. Although it is still true that passing people have difficulty in belonging in two worlds, with two racial identities, Larsen certainly advances the genre of the passing novel by using diverse types of passing women. Larsen depicts the viewpoint that reinforces the white centered society through two protagonists, Clare and Irene, while

she calls into question that black people are infected with the dominant society. This novel gives African-American writers an opportunity to break out of the conventional, and revise the "tragic mulatto" novel.

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